

A menu every Englishman would be proud of

Lunching in awe-inspiring grandeur of the concourse of the 'recently and fabulously' restored old St Pancras railway station

My guest for today, Jonathan Acton Davis, lives in Covent Garden, works in Gray's Inn ... and here we are, lunching in King's Cross. What, pray, do these three areas have in common, do you suppose? Answer: they are each of them situated in the Borough of Camden. Do you find that surprising? I found that surprising. Do you not find that surprising? Well I did: I was surprised, I can tell you. And the reason that my chum Jonathan works in Gray's Inn is that he is a barrister – a very distinguished QC, as a matter of fact, not to say deputy High Court judge – and so lunching out (as opposed to dining) is something of a rarity for him. Consequently, he was just as pleased as I to be settled in to the St Pancras Grand, within the recently and fabulously restored old station: a well-earned rest from the Bar. And talking of which ... just outside this really quite glamorous restaurant and right on the very concourse where the Eurostar plies its sous-Manche trade is what is said to be the longest bar in Europe: an endless and skinnily zinc-topped thing devoted to champagne. I went for a glass of bubbles here once with a pal while waiting for a train to Paris. Trouble is, they've always got some sort of an offer going: if you buy two glasses, it's almost as cheap to buy the bottle. And

if you buy the bottle, it's almost as cheap to buy a rather better bottle. And if you go for the rather better bottle, a magnum of the same costs so very little more ... And as a consequence, we both ended up penniless, smashed ... and missing the bloody train.

The draughty, not to say perfectly freezing concourse is hung with giant Olympic rings – for the sake, I suppose, of the soon-to-be-invading Europeans. Not so giant though as to even partially obscure the even more gigantic and hideous bronze statue of an embracing couple. The man looks to be an idiot, the woman a tart – displaying, as Jonathan pointed out, evident VPL: barristers, they are trained to observe such things. So the warmth of the restaurant was a welcome thing – the chamfered and gold-leafed ceiling shimmering rather grandly over a very clever layout: the place is huge, but all the tables, divided into blocks at hip-height by banquettes and uplit glass partitions, appear to have an intimacy of their own. The sense of space is doubled by walls of black-framed bevelled mirror, while the bar is broad, glittering, inviting, and studded with highly polished copper buckets charged with glistening bottles. It is a Searcy's operation, this – as is the mile-long and dangerous champagne bar without



■ Joseph at St Pancras Grand with guest Jonathan Acton Davis

– and they've come a very long way since the days when they had the odd wine bar, did the odd wedding. The tables and floor are dark walnut, the pendants frosted glass globes, and the general feel very good indeed.

Jonathan – who has the added and unspeakably grand distinction of being chairman of the Garrick Club – is truly the quintessential English gentleman (educated at The Hall in Hampstead, then Harrow) and was therefore delighted by the very English menu. There are native oysters, lobster, smoked haddock, fish and chips and all sorts of pies: game, fish, Old Spot Gloucester (pork) and steak and kidney pudding. "I've got to have that," said Jonathan, suitably greedily, "and before it I think I'll have soup of the day." And he did: very decisive, you see. He very much enjoyed the piping soup (potato and onion) and openly adored the steak and kidney. It did look good: not a scoop of a

larger pudding, but an individual suety mound looking not unlike a crème caramel, with its almost black and glossy gravy – and the horse-radish mash was just as you want it. "This is very, very good," he said. "Absolutely delicious. I would give it nine out of ten – only my mother's version, of course, can score a faultless 10". He had as a side sweet al dente carrots, and had added to the whole a hefty dollop of mustard (English, but of course).

Plentiful

There are quite a few "all day" dishes for itinerants in a hurry – although nobody here actually appeared to be travelling at all: no rush, no anxiety, no luggage. One of the most appealing of these snackettes was a grilled cheddar and ham sandwich with fat chips, at only nine quid. I nearly went for that – but in the end decided upon whitebait, followed by a sirloin steak. The whitebait was good, crunchy and plen-

tiful, served in a little silver bucket, the tartare well up to speed. Steaks are offered in a choice of three weights, and I – being moderate in all things – had the middle option of 250 grams (whatever that might be in English ounces). It was a good piece of meat – and although cut rather too thin, still medium rare as requested. The "fat chips" were each the size of a canoe and really pretty good (though not quite crispy enough) while the Bearnaise sauce was just woeful: it managed to taste of precisely nothing – no white wine in that one, no hint of shallot. We both agreed that the Pomerol we were drinking was silky, mellow and worryingly moreish. Oh and did I say that Jonathan had kicked off with a Bloody Mary? I didn't, did I? Well Jonathan, he kicked off with a Bloody Mary, which he said was spiced to just the right degree and packed all the necessary kick.

"This is a menu," he said now, "that any Englishman

would be pleased to see. And foreign tourists too, I should think". Well not, in my experience, if they are Parisians. Apart from the fact that they don't tend to visit London much (surprisingly many I have spoken to are actually very nervous and wary of the Tunnel) there is a tendency among even the more sophisticated to regard English food with a suspicion that borders upon the paranoid. I once invited my French publisher to Rules in Covent Garden: still the real English deal. She was aghast at the sight of all the gorgeous roasts and pies and game and fowl and fish. She ordered consomme, steak frites, a crème brulee and then gasped with relief at having successfully navigated safe passage through the treacherous depths of danger.

Anyway, Jonathan and I liked the St Pancras Grand rather a lot – and on the platform, I bade farewell to one of the most genial and amusing QCs it has been my pleasure to know. And this in turn reminded me of the time when on this very same platform some years ago a rather iffy slight acquaintance of mine alighted from the Paris Eurostar and bounded up to me delightedly with the news that he had recently taken silk ...! Turned out he'd just whipped a scarf out of Hermes.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

ST PANCRAS GRAND

Upper Concourse, St Pancras

International Station, N1

Tel: 020-7870 9900

■ Open Mon – Sat 7am-11pm. Sun 8am-11pm.

■ Food: ★★★★★☆☆

■ Service: ★★★★★☆☆

■ The Feeling:

★★★★★☆☆

■ Cost: As cheap or pricey as you like. Two of you could get out with £30 ... or £100 more.

Absolutely delicious. I would give it nine out of 10 – only my mother's version, of course, can score a faultless 10

Jonathan Acton Davis

to turn to the growers you can trust to make the best choices

"We know each other very well now," he told me on a recent visit to London. "We have a good relationship; we try to make it work from both sides."

But there is an intermediary who has helped build that relationship: Charles Sydney. His name is not one you'll see on bottles, although he and his wife Philippa work with growers to produce the La Grille range, a very sound introduction for UK drinkers to many Loire appellations, including muscadet – look out for the label in Majestic and Waitrose. Sydney describes his role

"courtier en vins" – that's a wine profession the French consider as old as time and regard as an effective, independent means of matchmaking between grower and consumer. He is certainly successful as far as Loire wines and UK drinkers are concerned.

Impressive

But to return to the Lieubeau family. The wine-making goes back to the mid-19th century, when the founding Joseph Grégoire Lieubeau – surnamed in recognition of the kindness he was shown at the Hotel Dieu in Nantes, on whose doorstep he had been

abandoned – learned his trade from his adoptive parents.

There were breaks forced by the repercussions of 20th century world wars, but in 1982 Pierre and Chantal Lieubeau founded the current company, Lieubeau Vigneron, whose estates have grown to close to 100 hectares. They lie on fine terroir above the Maine river, farming follows the environmentally-responsible terra vitis principles, particular attention is paid to ensuring grapes are fully ripe, and there is now a broad and respected range of wines.

Sainsbury's TTD muscadet apart, I've tasted two

Lieubeau wines sold at Waitrose: fragrant, rounded, stylish yet still crisp La Fruitiere chardonnay-sauvignon (normally £8, £6 until March 20), and M de la Fruitiere, a wine François describes as "muscadet for people who don't like muscadet" (£10, John Lewis Oxford Street Foodhall and Canary Wharf branches). M is a complex, impressive wine with an almost-burgundian richness from full malolactic fermentation, made only in the best vintages and intended to age. The vintage currently on sale is 2005, the 2009 I enjoyed is a treat to come.



■ Ripe grapes harvested at the Lieubeau vineyard